

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

HOW TO ORGANIZE AND CONDUCT COUNTY FORUMS

This Pamphlet is intended to assist Organizations and Individuals interested in establishing County and other Forums, particularly in Rural Areas. It has been prepared by the Extension Service and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration of the United States Department of Agriculture, in response to an increasing number of requests for guidance of this character. It is an attempt to present in readable, nontechnical language some fundamentals of a method for increasing opportunities for obtaining facts and viewpoints on problems and questions of interest to rural people. A companion pamphlet, "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods", is also available without cost.

Rev.ed.
follows

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The Extension Service and the
Agricultural Adjustment Administration cooperating

In many parts of the country farmers have become interested in sponsoring and participating in forums where current issues are discussed. Many of the forums are on a county-wide basis, to permit farmers from neighboring communities to talk things over.

As the interest in holding forums has spread, requests for material on how to organize such meetings have been repeatedly received by the Department of Agriculture. In view of the importance to the democratic process of a thorough and impartial threshing out of present-day public questions that farmers think important, the Department of Agriculture—with the Extension Service and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration cooperating—is responding to these requests by issuing the suggestion on how to organize county forums contained in the following pages.

A companion publication, called "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods", is also available, outlining procedures that have been found successful for meetings of informal groups. In addition to these two publications on method, two series of leaflets are available on some of the subjects most often chosen for discussion by farm groups. Discussion Series A gives brief introductions; Discussion Series B gives more extended presentations of the following topics:

1. What is the Chief Cause of the Farm Depression?
2. Do Farmers Want the Federal Government to Deal with Farm Problems?
3. Should American Agriculture Seek Recovery of World Markets or Arrange to Live at Home?
4. What Kind of Foreign Trade Policies do American Farmers Want? In Peace Time? In War Time?
5. What Kind of an Industrial Policy is Best for Agriculture?
6. The Farmer and the Consumer of Farm Products—What, If Any, Are Their Responsibilities to One Another?
7. Do Farmers Want High Tariffs on Farm Products? On Industrial Products?
8. Should Farm Benefit Payments Be Abolished?
9. Farm Prices—How Are They Made?
10. What Kind of Land Prices Would Be Best for Agriculture? For the Nation as a Whole?
11. Will Crop Adjustment Be Necessary or Desirable in Years to Come?
12. What Possibilities and Limitations do Farmers in this County Face in Seeking a Better Balance in Farm Production?
13. What Objectives Are Desirable for Farming as a Business? As a Way of Life?

14. What Should Farmers Seek to Accomplish Through Organization?

Two pamphlets, intended primarily for the assistance of leaders of rural discussion groups and forums, are now available:

1. Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods.
2. How to Organize and Conduct County Forums.

How to Organize and Conduct County Forums

What Are County Forums?

COUNTY FORUMS are meetings held to stimulate thinking on issues of current interest. At each of these meetings, information and points of view on the subject selected for discussion are presented by one or more speakers. Following the speeches, the chairman invites questions and comments from the listeners.

The purpose of a forum is to open up the question in hand, to give an idea of the various factors that ought to be included in a well-rounded consideration of the subject, and to point out the various attitudes toward the subject which are current in the community.

The forum is not an end in itself. If it is successfully carried on, it will stimulate members of the audience to examine and express their own ideas on the topic under review. The question period following the speech or speeches will allow opportunity for some of the participants in the forum to contribute to the discussion; others will press the evening's inquiry further in private conversations; still others will want to read up on the subject at home.

In many communities where forums are held, the thinking started at the county gathering is carried further by holding local discussion groups.

Discussion groups are quite different from forums or lectures. Speeches or long statements have no part in their proceedings. Each group of fifteen to thirty-five members is led by a chairman, who does not talk much himself, but who tries to draw out the views of the persons present. This allows people who are for the most part listeners at the county forum to take an active share in examining current problems and developing a reasoned attitude toward them.

How to Organize County Forums

When a county forum is started some one person is ordinarily the moving spirit who puts the county forces into action. It is important to the success of the forum for that person

1. to be acceptable to all factions in the community;
2. to have the energy, the organizing ability, and the time necessary to carry the project through.
3. to have a clear understanding of the methods of conducting forums.

If there is a council or other body representing the major groups in the county, the organizer might well ask for its sponsorship of the project. If there is no such council, he will probably find it advisable to form a county forum committee, representing the farm organizations, the cooperatives, the educational forces, and other interested agencies. It is highly desirable for the various groups in the community to be more or less equally represented on the committee.

The County Forum Council

At the first meeting of this county forum council, a plan for the forum meetings should be developed on the basis of local interests, local convenience and local needs.

The Forum Chairman

The council should also select a chairman or a series of chairmen to preside over the forums. The chairman sets the tone of the meeting. He should be the sort of person who can:

1. establish an informal relationship between speakers and audience.
2. keep his own remarks down to a minimum, and tactfully but firmly hold the speakers to agreed limits for the length of speeches.
3. draw out audience and speakers during the question period in such a way as to promote lively but good-humored discussion.
4. summarize concisely at the close of the meeting the information and attitudes which have been presented and the questions remaining for further discussion.

The work of carrying out the plan decided on by the council should be divided among its members or committees of its members. The various tasks will include—

Meeting Place

1. Selecting and preparing a meeting place. It is important that the place chosen should be one where all the people attending the forum will feel at home, where lighting and seating arrangements are as comfortable as possible and where it is easy to hear. Often the local high-school auditorium offers a good meeting place.

Publicity

2. Getting out announcements and securing publicity. Papers reporting the meetings will be aided in presenting accurate and interesting accounts if the council secures from the speakers advance copies of their talks or at least paragraphs containing the highlights of what they have to say.

Libraries

3. Interesting local libraries and the libraries of nearby colleges and organizations in making available some time in advance the publications, books, pamphlets, and periodicals which they have on the topic of the next forum meeting; in preparing exhibits of such material; in posting lists of books and pamphlets which could be ordered by persons interested in further study of the question.

Speakers

4. Securing speakers. The definite and early commitment of speakers to deal with given subjects on given dates is vital to the success of the forums. The speakers should understand clearly the purpose and kind of talks they are expected to give, and the length of time within which to give them. If there is one speaker, he should plan not to exceed thirty-five to forty-five minutes. If there are two speakers, a half-hour maximum should be enforced; if three, twenty minutes is a fair allotment. Speakers should bear in mind the question period to follow the scheduled program, and allow both time and material to make this a success. Talks should stimulate inquiry rather than attempt to be final and conclusive. Statistics are good only in small doses. (Where figures are important to the subject, a good way to present them is by a wall chart or picture that everyone can see.)

Speakers who present different angles of a subject are more likely to be stimulating than those who see altogether eye to eye, but the discussion should not degenerate into a "tit for tat" debate. The aim of the meeting is to provoke thought rather than to convince the listeners of one particular point of view.

So far as possible, the speakers should be farmers. Maximum use should be made of talent within the county, though outside speakers may lend stimulus if not secured in too great numbers.

The Forum Meeting

Several days in advance of the forum meeting, the chairman should check up to see that the members of the Council assigned the tasks outlined above have completed their preparations.

At the first meeting he should outline in a very few minutes the plan of the series, the need of talking about pressing issues at a time like the present, and the relation of the county forum to small discussion groups. At each meeting discussion groups that are being organized in the county should be spoken of, and reports on sessions held by such groups between forum meetings should be announced briefly.

Before introducing the speaker or speakers, the chairman may well indicate how the subject relates to the life of the community, and where the detailed problems of the locality fit into the problems of region, state, or nation. If there is more than one speaker, the chairman will probably wish to show how the topics of the speeches fit in with each other. After the last speech is over, he should summarize what has been said in such a manner as to open the way for the audience to go on with the discussion.

At the close of the meeting the audience should be referred to sources of further information on the question just discussed, and the time, place, subject, and speakers for the next forum should be announced.

Suggested Series of Forums

Where the plan for the county forum is made, certain subjects will immediately present themselves as likely to lead to lively discussion. Recent experience of farm groups in various sections of the country indicates that many of these subjects are matters of common interest to the country as a whole. Others are regional or local in character.

As mentioned on the inside cover of this leaflet, the Department of Agriculture has arranged for the preparation of material on some of the subjects of country-wide interest. It has likewise compiled, for chairmen and speakers at forums, "Source Folders" on the 7 county forum themes listed below. These themes will also be treated by speakers in a radio series arranged by the Department. The subjects and approximate dates of this series are as follows:

First Half of December 1935

County Forum Theme: "The Farm Depression."

Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "What is the Chief Cause of the Farm Depression?"
2. "Do Farmers Want the Federal Government to Deal with Farm Problems?"

Last Half of December, Holiday Period

First Half of January 1936

County Forum Theme: "The Farmer and World Trade."

Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "Should American Agriculture Seek Recovery of World Markets or Arrange to Live at Home?"
2. "What Kind of Foreign Trade Policies do American Farmers Want? In Peace Time? In War Time?"

Last Half of January

County Forum Theme: "The Balance between City and Country."

Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "What Kind of Industrial Policy is Best for Agriculture?"
2. "The Farmer and the Consumer of Farm Products—What, If Any, Are Their Responsibilities to One Another?"

First Half of February

County Forum Theme: "Protection for Industry and Agriculture."

Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "Do Farmers Want High Tariffs on Farm Products? On Industrial Products?"
2. "Should Farm Benefit Payments be Abolished?"

Last Half of February

County Forum Theme: "Fair Farm Prices."

Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "Farm Prices—How Are They Made?"
2. "What Kind of Land Prices Would Be Best for Agriculture? For the Nation as a Whole?"

First Half of March

County Forum Theme: "Future Agricultural Programs."

Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "Will Crop Adjustment be Necessary or Desirable in Years to Come?"
2. "What Possibilities and Limitations do Farmers of this County Face in Seeking a Better Balance in Farm Production?"

Last Half of March

The last two discussion meetings and the final county forum might well be devoted to a theme and topics selected locally. The following suggestions are made where local selection is not desired:

County Forum Theme: "Rural Life in the Future."

Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "What Objectives are Desirable for Farming—as a Business? As a Way of Life?"
2. "What Should Farmers Seek to Accomplish Through Organization?"

More About Forums

Bowman, Le Roy C. *HOW TO LEAD DISCUSSION*. A guide for the Use of Group Leaders. New York, N. Y. The Woman's Press, 600 Lexington Avenue, 1934. 32 pages. \$0.35.

Lindeman, E. C. *SOCIAL EDUCATION*. New York, N. Y. The New Republic. 1933. \$1.00.

Cartwright, M. A. *PANEL*. New York. *Journal of Adult Education*, 5: 37-42, January 1933.

Hansen, A. O. *DISCUSSION TECHNIQUE*. New York. *School and Society*, 34: 93-95, July 18, 1931.

- Rowden, Dorothy. OPEN FORUMS. In *Hand book of Adult Education in the United States*. 1934. P. 63-69. New York, American Association of Adult Education. The Association, 60 East 42nd Street.
- Sheffield, A. D. CREATIVE DISCUSSION: A STATEMENT OF METHOD FOR LEADERS AND MEMBERS OF DISCUSSION GROUPS. New York, N. Y., The Association Press. 1927. Third ed. rev. \$.50.
- Studebaker, J. W. DES MOINES' FORUM EXPERIMENT. *School Life*, 18: 175. May 1933. Illus. The American Way. Democracy at work in the Des Moines Forums. New York, McGraw Hill Book Company. 1935. \$2.00.
- Walser, Frank. THE ART OF CONFERENCES. New York, Harper and Brothers. 1933. 305 pages. \$3.00.
- Williams, A. P. CONFERENCE PROCEDURE IN TEACHING VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE. Use of the Conference in Agricultural Evening Classes. Washington, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1932. Rev. ed. 35 pages. (U. S. Federal Board for Vocational Education. Bulletin No. 147. Agricultural Series No. 38.)
- Ewbanks, H. L. HOW TO CONDUCT PUBLIC DISCUSSION. Madison, Wisconsin, College of Agriculture. (Forthcoming.)
- Elliott, Harrison P. THE WHY AND HOW OF GROUP DISCUSSION. New York, Association Press. \$.25.
- THE PROCESS OF GROUP THINKING. New York, Association Press. 1928. \$3.00.